

Chernyshevsky, Nikolai Gavrilovich

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CHERNYSHEVSKY, NIKOLAI GAVRILOVICH

(1828–1889), Russian radical journalist, writer, literary critic, and thinker.

Nikolai Gavrilovich Chernyshevsky ([/people/social-sciences-and-law/political-science-biographies/nikolai-gavrilovich-chernyshevsky](#)) was the son of an Orthodox priest. From 1842 to 1845 he attended the theological seminary in Saratov, and in 1850 he graduated from the Department of History and Philology of the University of St. Petersburg ([/places/united-states-and-canada/us-political-geography/st-petersburg](#)). Chernyshevsky was a polyglot; he knew eight foreign languages. As a student Chernyshevsky impressed his professors with his distinguished knowledge in literature and linguistics, and they predicted that he would have a bright academic career.

After two years of teaching in Saratov from 1851 to 1853, Chernyshevsky returned to St. Petersburg ([/places/united-states-and-canada/us-political-geography/st-petersburg](#)). There Chernyshevsky began to write for the popular journals *Otechestvennye Zapiski* (*Annals of the Fatherland*) and *Sovremennik* (*Contemporary*). In 1859 he became editor in chief of *Sovremennik*. There he published his *Ocherki gogolevskogo perioda russkoi literatury* (*Essays on the Gogolian Period in Russian Literature*), "his first and most important contribution to literary criticism" according to Eugene Lampert (1965, p. 110). Soon Chernyshevsky became very popular among radical youth and was called a "prophet of the young generation" (Irina Paperno, 1988).

However, Chernyshevsky was not satisfied with only doing journalist work; he attempted to continue his academic career and prepared his dissertation, "The Aesthetic Relations of Art to Reality" (1855). This dissertation presented a doctrine about the superiority of reality over art. He believed that nothing could be more beautiful than that which exists in reality; as he wrote, "Beauty is life." According to Chernyshevsky, art should be a "textbook of life." He rejected "art for art's sake." However, the Academic Board of the University of St. Petersburg did not share Chernyshevsky's views on art and did not approve his dissertation. According to T. Pecherskaya, Chernyshevsky said that his dissertation was his interpretation of the ideas of the philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach, but the conservative Academic Board could not understand him.

After his unsuccessful attempt to pursue an academic career, Chernyshevsky continued his journalistic work and published many essays on art, literature, philosophy, and radical socialist thought. He was a materialist and followed the ideas of German philosophers of the early and mid-nineteenth century. Chernyshevsky propounded radical ideas in his essays and criticized the emancipation of serfs by the government from the radical point of view. He believed that the liberation of the serfs without land was inadequate and mockingly cruel to the peasants. Francis B. Randall (*N.G. Chernyshevskii*, 1967, preface) wrote that Chernyshevsky called himself a "socialist" but took his doctrine "not from Marx but from the French radicals of the decades before the revolution of 1848." Chernyshevsky believed in the peasant commune as the germ of the future socialist society and called for a peasant revolution in his publications. Fearing Chernyshevsky's growing influence, the government closed *Contemporary* in 1861 and put its editor under [secret police](#) ([/social-sciences-and-law/law/crime-and-law-enforcement/secret-police](#)) surveillance. In July 1862 Chernyshevsky was arrested and imprisoned in the Peter and Paul Fortress in St. Petersburg. During his two years of imprisonment from 1862 to 1864, when Chernyshevsky waited for his sentence, he wrote his most famous novel *What Is to Be Done?* and several other works of fiction. In the novel *What Is to Be Done?* Chernyshevsky described the life of a new type of people, who lived by their own labor and led a new kind of family life, where the enlightened woman was a man's lifelong companion. The novel popularized the ideas of women's equality and "cooperative socialism"; it depicted the future society as a society of equality and happiness for all. This novel was a synthesis of Chernyshevsky's sociopolitical, philosophical, and ethical views. The novel became very popular among the radical youth. Aside from the ideas it contained, this work was not a great literary achievement. Lampert (op. cit., p. 224) states that Chernyshevsky "wrote his novel on a fairly low imaginative plane." All his heroes speak with the same voice, men and women alike. Chernyshevsky himself did not have any delusions about his literary talent. He wrote his wife from Siberia ([/places/commonwealth-independent-states-and-baltic-nations/cis-and-baltic-political-geography-76](#)): "I have not a trace of artistic talent ... and all [the novel's] merit consists merely in its truthfulness" (Lampert, op. cit., p. 223).

In spite of the lack of direct evidence of Chernyshevsky's participation as a member in the revolutionary organizations, he was condemned to fourteen (later reduced to seven) years of forced labor, followed by lifelong exile in Siberia. According to Lampert, "the government had come to realize the extent of Chernyshevsky's influence on the younger generation; it knew what his views were, and it had taken fright." The government considered Chernyshevsky's ideas a danger to the existing order.

On May 19, 1864, the ceremony of "civil execution" was performed on Chernyshevsky in the center of St. Petersburg in Mytninskaya Square. "After sentence has been read out he was forced to kneel, a sword was broken over his head and he was then set in a pillory by a chain," wrote Alexei Suvorin (Lampert, op. cit., p. 130). However, instead the reaction of condemnation anticipated by the authorities, the big crowd stood silent. Then somebody from the crowd threw a bunch of flowers at Chernyshevsky's feet.

Chernyshevsky spent more than twenty-five years in prison, forced labor, and exile. During this time he continued to write fiction, essays, and philosophical works (the most famous of his philosophical works was *The Nature of Human Knowledge*). The last years of his life he devoted to the translation of Georg Weber's *Universal History*. Chernyshevsky refused to ask the authorities for "imperial mercy" even when they encouraged him to do so. Chernyshevsky believed that he was innocent and thus did not need be forgiven by the government. Chernyshevsky's fortitude brought him respect even from among his opponents. The respect for Chernyshevsky and deep sympathy for his misfortune was expressed by the Russian writer Fyodor Dostoyevsky.

Chernyshevsky received permission from the authorities to return to his native city of Saratov only four months before his death. Government persecution fueled the image of Chernyshevsky as a "revolutionary saint." His works were denied publication in [Russia](#) ([/places/commonwealth-independent-states-and-baltic-nations/cis-and-baltic-political-geography/russia](#)) until the first Russian revolution in 1905. However, the novels and essays of Chernyshevsky were spread around the country illegally, often in handwritten copies. His novel *What Is to Be Done?* became a table book of several generations of Russian radical youth. This novel was considered a classic of [Russian literature](#) ([/literature-and-arts/literature-other-modern-languages/russian-and-eastern-european-literature-2](#)) in Soviet times. After the collapse of the socialist system, people lost interest in the pro-socialist ideas and works of Chernyshevsky. He died on October 29, 1989.

See also: dostoyevsky, fyodor mikhailovich; journalism; socialism; what is to be done

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Nikolai Gavrilovich Chernyshevsky

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The Russian radical journalist Nikolai Gavrilovich Chernyshevsky (1828-1889) was a literary critic and social theorist. His best-known work, the novel What Is To Be Done?, became a classic of the Russian revolutionary movement.

The son of a priest, Nikolai Chernyshevsky was born on July 1, 1828, in Saratov. He started his literary career in 1855 with a master's thesis on esthetics which he submitted at the University of St. Petersburg ([/places/united-states-and-canada/us-political-geography/st-petersburg](https://www.encyclopedia.com/people/social-sciences-and-law/political-science-biographies/nikolai-gavrilovich-chernyshevsky)). In this work Chernyshevsky attacked contemporary esthetic theory, which held that art was an independent transcendent realm. He argued that the arts in general, and literature in particular, could justify their existence only by accurately describing, explaining, and evaluating the actual in terms comprehensible to all—by being a "textbook of life." This utilitarian view made a strong impact and later assumed a quasi-official status under communism, serving to sanction government regimentation of the arts.

From 1855 to 1862 Chernyshevsky worked as a writer and editor for the radical journal *Contemporary*. His preoccupation with esthetic theory led to a series of literary studies. He then became increasingly engrossed in the domestic and foreign scene and wrote numerous essays on philosophy, politics, and economics.

For Chernyshevsky, ethics, like art, must be based on the philosophy of utilitarianism. He held that human behavior is motivated by self-interest. He believed that knowledge inevitably leads people to choose good rather than evil, and he attributed human wickedness to ignorance of the advantages of avoiding evil.

Chernyshevsky's economic theories were socialistic. He loathed the principle of *laissez-faire*, since he believed unrestricted competition sacrificed the weak to the strong and labor to capital. He held that free enterprise distributed goods unfairly and failed to stimulate production. Chernyshevsky's "toiler's theory" embodied his economic thought. By toiler he meant both the worker and the peasant; for him the *muzhik* (peasant) was the person of destiny for Russia.

The toiler's theory was based on Chernyshevsky's beliefs that the welfare of the individual was of paramount importance and that goods rightfully belonged only to those who had produced them. He advocated economic equality and elimination of unproductive social classes. Although he was ambiguous about the nature of the controls that would achieve these ends, Chernyshevsky did not call for a centrally planned, nationalized economy. Instead, he envisioned a loose aggregate of communities resembling phalansteries (voluntary

associations, each engaging in both industry and agriculture on a cooperative basis). The voluntary associations were to be autonomous units, democratically administered and independent from central authority.

In 1862 Chernyshevsky published in *Contemporary* a series of open letters to an unnamed person who was clearly none other than Czar [Alexander II](#) ([/people/history/russian-soviet-and-cis-history-biographies/alexander-ii](#)). The Czar had emancipated the serfs in 1861, but Chernyshevsky pointed out that, although this reform had affected the appearance of the relation between master and serf, little real change had occurred. He hinted that revolution was perhaps the only way to completely abolish serfdom.

Because of his criticism of the government Chernyshevsky was watched carefully by the czarist [secret police](#) ([/social-sciences-and-law/law/crime-and-law-enforcement/secret-police](#)), and in 1862 his name headed the list of political suspects. That year he was arrested and imprisoned. While in prison he wrote the novel *What Is To Be Done?* (1863). In it he rejects such concepts as honor, conscience, duty, and self-sacrifice. *What Is To Be Done?* soon became the bible of the radical youth. It called for freedom in personal relations and for dedication to society, and it contained effective arguments for women's emancipation, for socialism, and indirectly for revolution. Lenin called it "one of those books the impact of which lasts a lifetime."

In 1864 Chernyshevsky was exiled to Siberia. Broken in health, he returned to civilization in 1883. He died in Saratov on Oct. 29, 1889.

Further Reading

Chernyshevsky's *Selected Philosophical Essays* (1953) contains a large collection of articles. His *What Is To Be Done? Tales about New People* (1961), with an introduction by E. H. Carr, is important as an intellectual document and as a prototype of later didactic radical novels. Recommended for general historical background are Tomas G. Masaryk, *The Spirit of Russia: Studies in History, Literature, and Philosophy* (2 vols., 1913; trans. 1919; 2d ed. 1955), and Franco Venturi, *Roots of Revolution: A History of the Populist and Socialist Movements in Nineteenth Century Russia* (1960).

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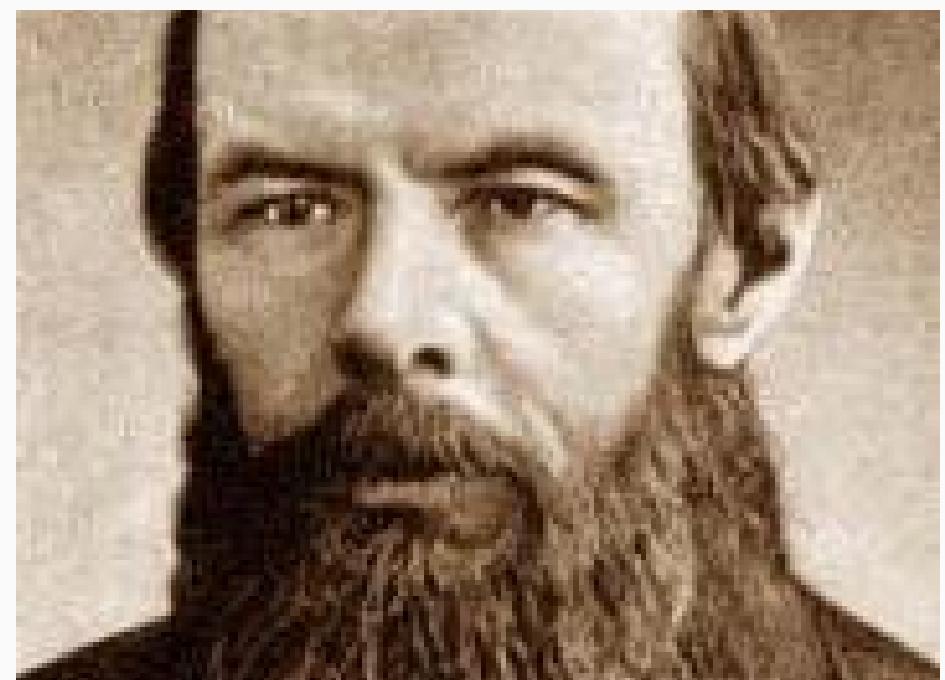
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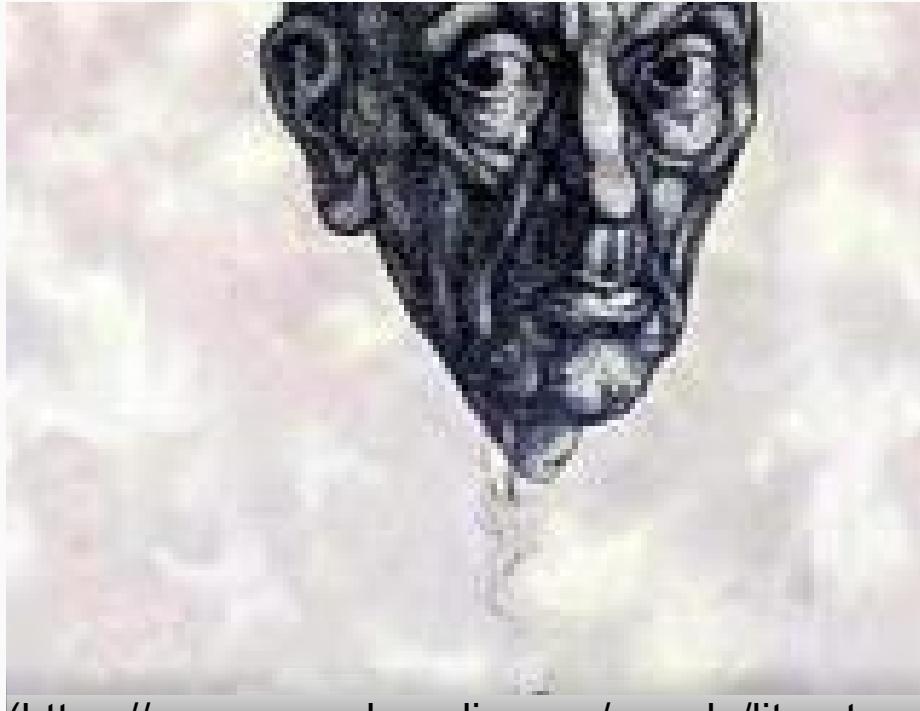
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